The Value of Third Level Sport and Physical Activity
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Student Sport Ireland

Student Sport Ireland (SSI) is recognised as the representative body for higher education sport and physical activity on the island of Ireland. Our mission is to grow quality student sport competition, enhance wellbeing and lead the sector.

In 2021 29 HEIs representing over a quarter of a million full-time students affiliated to the organisation. SSI is funded by its affiliated HEIs and receives support in the form of core and programme grants from Sport Ireland.

The organisation’s strategic development is set out in a three year strategic plan published in September 2021. The document, entitled “Leading Student Sport in Ireland”, sets out three strategic objectives for the organisation over a three year timeframe and which are aligned to three strategic pillars.

The strategic objectives are: to enable more regular activity for students and to support greater engagement and interaction with NGBs (Competition Pillar); to promote, enable and highlight the benefits of physical activity and wellbeing to the student experience and inspire more students to be more active and more often (Physical Activity and Wellbeing Pillar); to develop the skills of those students involved in sport, to provide learning, development, networking, information and knowledge sharing opportunities for our members and their staff, and to present and promote SSI and the sector to our stakeholders through promotion, lobbying and advocacy (Leadership Pillar).

The organisation has two full-time staff with offices at Sport HQ at the Sport Ireland Campus and is governed by a 10 person board of directors.
**Introduction**

As students and third level institutions return to on campus learning following an unprecedented two years, this position statement provides an evidence-based account of the value of sport and physical activity in supporting students’ physical and mental wellbeing. Student Sport Ireland (SSI) is the governing body for third level sport, promoting and developing sport and physical activity in all third level colleges on the island of Ireland. This position statement is a call to action for the university sector to increase engagement in sport and physical activity for all students. The summary document examines four key areas:

- **The benefits to health and wellbeing of an active student population and of a strong sporting offer.** Third level sport and physical activity has the potential to improve the physical and mental health of students, boosting recruitment and retention, while enhancing the student experience.

- **The alignment and impact of the third level sports and physical activity sector towards government and state body objectives.** Third level institutions can play a key societal role, promoting health and wellbeing among students, as well as conducting research to support policy and practice. In addition, investment in facilities, resources and elite athletes supports the development of high performance student athletes across Ireland.

- **Investment in sport and physical activity.** Investment in sport and physical activity from the third level sector continues to grow, through investment in facilities, scholarships, staff, and services. Greater investment may be required in non-competitive/recreational sport to support physical activity and sport participation.

- **The impact of COVID-19 on the sector.** The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the behaviours of third level students, impacting negatively on their physical and mental health. Providing these students with opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity is now of greater importance upon their return to onsite learning.

In the current economic, health, and political context, sport and physical activity can enhance the student experience, overcoming the indirect consequences of COVID-19 such as social isolation and sedentary behaviour. The return of on-campus experiences presents an opportunity to develop and extend the position of sport and physical activity in the third level sector.
Benefits to Health and Wellbeing

Third level institutions have the potential to be key contributors in the promotion and development of a healthy society, positively influencing the health and wellbeing of young adults. The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) Annual Report 2019, revealed that 83% of males aged 16-19 took part in sport, compared to 69% of females in this age category, while the 20-24 age group were less engaged in sports (71% of males, 59% of females). The SSI commissioned Student Activity and Sports Study Ireland (SASSI) indicated 65% of third level students participated in sport or physical activity however almost one third of students reported they did not do enough physical activity to keep healthy and 81% revealed that they would like to do more physical activity.

Physical activity and sports have been shown to positively influence the wellbeing of university students, resulting in improved physical and mental health and it is vital that colleges and universities create and promote opportunities for students to be active. While there are significant levels of anxiety, depression and stress among third level students in Ireland, sport and physical activity can be used as a medium to increase students' understanding of mental health.

Recruitment, retention & attainment
As well as enhancing student wellbeing, investment in sport and physical activity at third level can support student recruitment, student retention, and graduate employability. Identity and belonging is an important aspect of the students' third level experience, and university sport and the associated university 'brand' can foster this, aiding student recruitment. In the Irish context, sports scholarships attract elite athletes to an institution while also raising its profile in the market. Partnerships with national governing bodies, sponsors and other external partners are essential in this process, and it is vital relationships are developed to create further opportunities for sports scholarships, to meet the demand required.

Social networks are extremely important in the transition to third level education, particularly for students from under-represented groups. Engaging with prior interests, such as organised sport and physical activity can prompt social interactions, helping students to develop social supports and reduce social isolation. If students recognise an emphasis on wellbeing within a campus, it can positively impact their perceived health and their engagement with college activities throughout their course. While academic commitments have been highlighted as barriers to participation, accessible facilities and a more flexible timetable for study presents an opportunity for students to increase participation in physical activity and sport.
As students transition to third level, engaging in sport and physical activity outside of their academic studies can also improve retention rates. The development of social connections through shared interests increases satisfaction levels among students, and it is important that incoming students are made aware of the value of these experiences, and the range of activities available to them. In addition to this, third level institutions must be cognisant of the demographic range of their student population, offering opportunities that enable social integration for all groups. The SASSI report revealed that male students were more likely to be highly active than female students, and social support from friends plays a key role for females. While there has been significant emphasis on increasing sports participation and physical activity rates among adolescent girls, further supports may be needed in third level.

Finally, physical activity and sports participation can positively impact academic attainment and graduate employability, supporting the development of transferable skills beyond students’ qualification. Students who actively participate in sport had greater perceived confidence, and developed employable competencies such as teamwork and leadership skills, with the latter finding particular favourability with employers.
Third Level Sport Sector - Alignment and Impact

The third level sector has the potential to play a central role in the delivery of government policy relating to the health and wellbeing of third level students. For example, the Healthy Campus initiative aims to promote the physical health, mental health and wellbeing of all third level students 30, supporting preventative and public health strategies in the implementation of the Sláintecare plan 31. Similarly, the Get Ireland Active plan aims to increase physical activity levels of the population in Ireland, increasing physical activity levels through engagement with active transport, implementing initiatives such as the Smarter Travel Campus 32. Sport Northern Irelands’ Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan 2018-2023 also highlights the role third level education has in promoting mental health and wellbeing in sport, in partnership with the relevant stakeholders 33. Third level institutions have the ability to address ‘locally identified needs and national health priorities’ in collaboration with relevant stakeholders 34. Both the consultation document for the New Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland, and the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 in the Republic of Ireland emphasise the importance of creating opportunities for third level students to engage in physical activity and sport 35, 36. This is extremely important for less represented groups such as ‘females, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, persons with a disability, the LGBTI+ community, the Traveller community and other ethnic minorities’35, 36.
Research
Third level institutions are ‘uniquely placed to influence and transform society through research, teaching, and learning, developing new knowledge and understanding about promoting health and wellbeing’ 34. The National Sports Policy 2018-2027 recommends the development of evaluation tools for programmes and initiatives, utilising the ‘expanding expertise in the third level and other sectors’ 35, while the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan identified the government’s plan to increase wellbeing research within research strategy and plans 30. Although third level institutions partner with the Sport Ireland Institute and High Performance Unit to conduct applied research in areas relevant to high performance 37, further cooperation is needed between third level institutions and government departments to ‘focus on longitudinal research, creativity and innovation that can enhance sport and physical activity experiences for all’ 36.

High Performance
Third level institutions are central to the development pathway of elite athletes, providing supports including scholarship programmes and the provision of facilities 37. Currently, these institutions aim to attract elite athletes through sports scholarships, enabling them to compete in their sport while completing their studies 14. Over 8,000 scholarships/bursaries were offered to elite athletes across the island of Ireland from 2015-2019, with these athlete ambassadors raising the profile of the institution 14, 38. At the 2021 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, 52% and 48% of the respective Irish delegations were either current third level students or recent graduates. Of the 8 medals won by Irish athletes at the Olympics a total of 6, 2 gold and 4 bronze, were claimed by current or recent graduates. A number of third level staff were also part of athletes’ support teams 39.

Despite the range of supports provided, it is recognised that further improvements are necessary in undergraduate sports scholarships to retain elite athletes in Irish third level institutions 35. As highlighted in the Sport Ireland High Performance Strategy 2021-2032, the third level sector has the potential to play a more prominent role in the high performance ecosystem, providing centres of excellence in a nationally coordinated facilities plan for high performance 37. Institutions, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, have the ‘opportunity to further develop integrated systems to support high performance student athletes’ 39.

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Investment

The Value of Third Level Sport and Physical Activity

Third level sport and physical activity contributes to the local and national economy, with an average yearly investment of over €11 million supporting the provision of sports and physical activity at all third level institutes \(^3\). The SSI Self-Assessment Review (SAR) 2020 examined the investment, provision and engagement in sport and physical activity across the third level sector \(^3\).

Third level institutes annual invest an average of over €11 million in the provision of sports and physical activity

The majority of third level institutes now have dedicated structures to support the provision of sport and physical activity, led by a Director/Head of Sport. However, it appears that the number of full time and part time sports staff employed has decreased since the 2015 SASSI study \(^3\). There is an average of 38 sports staff (comprising of Sports Dept staff, gym staff, and leisure facility staff that deliver student specific services) at each third level institute, equating to one member of sports staff to every 323 students.

Facilities play a key role in student recruitment, with investment also shown to positively impact engagement in sport and physical activity on campus \(^3\). On average, third level institutes have 4,582m\(^2\) of indoor facilities, which are predominantly comprised of sports halls and fitness suite areas, followed by free weights areas, studio rooms/other courts, and track and field facilities. There was an average capital investment of €6.25 million per institution from 2015-2019, and the average investment in sport and physical activity provision was €2.73 million per institution, €221.40 per student, across the four years. At each institution, an average of €1.43 million was invested in representative/competitive club sport, an average of €240,000 was invested in non-competitive/recreational sport, while €1.06 million was invested in exercise and fitness programmes. Across all third level institutes the average investment from 2015-2019 per student was €131.70 for representative/competitive club sport, €21.80 in non-competitive/recreational sport, and €67.90 in exercise and fitness programmes. However, student enrolment in third level institutions has also increased in subsequent years \(^40, 41\).

The investment of third level institutes also includes sports scholarships and bursaries, with each institution investing an average of €565,000 from 2015-2019, providing fee waivers, accommodation, and support services. Although female role models have a significant impact on female participation in sport and physical activity \(^42\), males received more than double the number of high performance scholarships than females \(^3\).
COVID-19

The third level sector was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a 'prolonged model of predominantly emergency online provision of education and training, with very restricted on-site access to facilities and person-to-person contact' 43. The restrictions impacted the health and lifestyle behaviours of individuals, resulting in declines in mental health for some 44-47. The pandemic has compounded students’ mental health difficulties, and social challenges 7, 48, 49. The transition to remote learning negatively impacted students’ mental health due to social isolation 50. In addition, third level students were called upon to support the delivery of healthcare and education throughout the pandemic 51, 52, and 15-24 year olds have had the highest levels of confirmed cases of COVID-19 53. Third level students in Ireland have been identified as ‘a vulnerable group, in need of support during these difficult times’ 54. Engaging in physical activity and sports in a safe manner has the potential to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, and ‘offset indirect consequences of COVID-19 on disease prevention and mental well-being’ 55-57.

Engaging in physical activity and sports in a safe manner has the potential to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, and ‘offset indirect consequences of COVID-19 on disease prevention and mental well-being’ 89% of Irish people acknowledged they intended to return to sport after restrictions had lifted 58, and it is important that students have sufficient opportunities to engage with sport and physical activity. The Irish Government’s Safe Return Plan for a Safe Return to Onsite Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22 has identified a number of objectives to support students upon their return, and increase the levels of activity through sports clubs and activities, to support a ‘sense of belonging’ for students 43. The return of onsite education provides an opportunity for new beginnings in the provision of sport and physical activity 59, providing positive, inclusive activities for all students 60.


